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CareShare: an intergenerational programme for people with dementia and nursery children

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Introduction

Intergenerational programmes, bringing together older people and people with dementia with children and younger people have a long history, with programmes described in the USA since the 1950s. In the UK, the London-based charity ‘Magic Me’ has been running programmes for schoolchildren (aged 9 and over) going into care homes since the 1980s. One of us (BW) was involved in the 1980’s in an (unpublished) evaluation of one of their projects, which involved weekly visits to the care home, with the children provided with structured activities and games to engage in with the residents. BW was struck by the level of engagement of most of the residents in the care home, and by the positive attitudes of the children after the programme. The latter was especially interesting, given that at the time a typical care home setting did not seem the ideal context to seek to build positive attitudes to ageing among children. In the last few years there appears to have been a resurgence of interest in intergenerational approaches, and this paper provides some brief examples from the international literature on their effects, before reporting on one high-profile project in Wales.

Examples from the international literature

The authors are currently completing a scoping review of the effects of intergenerational programmes for older people / people with dementia and young children. A review by Gualano et al. (2018) is also available. In considering the research to date a number of key

dimensions emerge. These include: the age of the children involved; the location of the project (in the older people's setting / the children's setting / or on neutral ground); whether or not people with dementia are included; the type of activities undertaken; and the frequency and duration of the programme. Some recent evaluations include:

'Grandfriends' - Low et al. (2015) describe a residential aged care unit in Australia which shares a site with a preschool. Each child taking part was paired with a "grandfriend" and participated together in a range of activities such as discussions (e.g., similarities and differences), craft (e.g., collage), and games (e.g., bingo). The activities took place in the aged care unit and were jointly facilitated by educators from the day care centre and by the care home staff. Sessions took place weekly for 12 weeks, each of 45 minutes duration. The researchers reported that care home residents (N=21) showed greater enjoyment and passive engagement when interacting with the preschool children, as compared with 'usual activities'. However, there were no changes in quality of life, agitation, or sense of community in comparison to residents (n = 20) randomized to usual care.

Intergenerational playgroup program (IPP) - Skropeta et al. (2014), also in Australia, report an intergenerational programme involving socialisation and interaction between three distinct generations: residents in an aged care facility; children aged 4 and younger; and the children's carers (parents, grandparents and nannies). Sessions lasted 90 minutes and took place weekly over a six-month period. The majority (85%) of the 43 participating residents had dementia, ranging from mild to severe levels of impairment. No change in depression scores on the Geriatric Depression Scale were found, and although the older people reported an increase in fatigue over the six-month period, in the absence of a control group this was difficult to interpret. Qualitative interviews with participants were more informative, with themes such as 'two-way contributions' and 'personal growth' emerging. Participants described meaningful engagement and experiencing a sense of connectedness and friendships in a safe and secure environment.

Age to Age - Doll & Bolender (2010) evaluated outcomes for nursing home residents from having a kindergarten classroom located in the nursing home. The 21 children met with their teacher in a room at the nursing home, spending the entire day there, apart from occasional 'field trips' to the school a short distance away. This

arrangement was designed to allow resident engagement with the children up to seven times per day. This engagement took the form of active participation in physical exercise, reading, dining, and special events, as well as passively observing the students through a large window into the classroom, or in the playground. The research team examined the nursing home records (which included the standardised assessments and ratings comprising the Minimum Data Set) of 21 residents who were closely involved with the kindergarten over an 8-month period and made a comparison with a randomly selected control group of 21 residents not involved. There were no differences between groups in change over time on the variables examined from the Minimum Data Set (which included mood, level of function etc.), however qualitatively there appeared to be improvements particularly in quality of life, but also in relation to mood, activity levels, health and sense of worth and value.

These examples illustrate the contrast between positive qualitative evaluations of these programmes and the rather elusive nature of quantitative changes, which can perhaps be partly attributed to small sample sizes and lack of adequate comparison groups. The diverse nature of the programmes themselves and the lack of evaluation of the effects on children is also evident.

The Careshare project

In recent years, there have been a number of examples of intergenerational work at Bangor University, often associated with the various arts and dementia projects with which we and our colleagues have been involved (e.g. Gregory & Windle, 2013). At the 2014 FPOP Conference BW described the ‘Hidden Corners’ project, where teenagers were supported in taking music into care homes, culminating in a public event at the University Arts & Innovation Centre.

In March 2016, we were approached by a locally-based TV production company, Darlun TV, who were developing a concept for a TV programme looking at intergenerational care. Their interest had been inspired by a YouTube clip of a project in Seattle, the Intergenerational Learning Centre. Although our experience of intergenerational programmes at the University was with older children and teenagers, Darlun felt that focussing on pre-school children would allow exploration of bringing together two groups of people who are seen as being in need of ‘care’, and whether there was scope for that care to then be shared. We looked at

cognitive stimulation materials, and whether these might provide a basis for shared activities, and also considered the role of reminiscence for the older people.

Sony, in conjunction with the Welsh language TV channel, S4C, were seeking innovative TV formats (for potential international distribution) and after a successful ‘pitch’ by Darlun, a pilot programme ‘Hen Blant Bach’ was commissioned for S4C (The title is taken from a familiar Welsh lullaby – probably ‘dear little children’, although Microsoft translate comes up with ‘old toddlers’!)

The concept was for nursery age children to visit older people living in the community attending a care facility for three full days and to engage together in a range of activities. The pilot programme was filmed in August 2016, in a day care centre in Caernarfon. Some (not all) of the older participants were living with dementia, and the preferred language of virtually all of the children and older people was Welsh. As with the successful ‘Secret life of 4 year olds’ programmes, two psychologists (CHJ and NW) were filmed observing and commenting on the interactions. Together they bring the expertise required in both child development and gerontology / dementia care. The programme was screened on S4C (in Welsh with English sub-titles, on 28th December 2016.

We were not able to formally evaluate the effects of the pilot project, as TV shooting deadlines were too tight for an application for ethics approval, but the interactions that we witnessed over the three days, the engagement and the positive feedback from all involved were beyond our expectations. It clearly also made for good TV, as S4C commissioned three further programmes and BBC1 Wales commissioned an English language programme also, to focus specifically on dementia.

This gave us an opportunity to gain ethics approval for a formal evaluation of the programme, and we were able to secure funding for a research student (LH) on a Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarship (a European Convergence funds programme), in partnership with Darlun TV.

The filming for the four additional programmes took place between May and October 2017, continuing with a model of three whole days of contact (in one week), with a wide range of activities, group and one-to-one, sharing meals, music and fun, with some activities

encouraging reminiscence. The filming became more sophisticated, using a 12-camera set up as used in the ‘Secret life of 4 year olds’ series.

The three Welsh language programmes were screened on S4C in December 2017 (including a Christmas special first shown on Christmas Day with a mandatory snow machine!). In April 2018, Hen Blant Bach was awarded a silver medal in the 2018 New York Festivals International Film and Television Awards and a month later was named the ‘Best Factual Entertainment Programme’, at the 2018 Celtic Media Awards.

The English language programme, ‘The toddlers who took on dementia’ was first screened in Dementia Action Week on BBC1 Wales, May 23rd 2018. Extracts were shown at the FPOP Conference, illustrating some of the heart-warming interactions between the participants living with dementia, and the toddlers, who showed a wonderful capacity to accept the older people as they were. The engagement of the older people was evident, in group and one-to-one activities and at meal times. The transformation of a person with advanced dementia who typically had little or no verbal communication and spent her day at the day-centre nursing her dolls was captured by the filming. On day three, she had put the dolls aside and was interacting and dancing with the children, being heard to say ‘when are you coming back?’ Although not currently available on i-Player, some clips may be found at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b3kk1h>

It is worth noting (because they are often confused) that in August 2017, Channel 4 screened a high-profile programme ‘Care Home for 4 year olds’. Although similar in theme, there are some key differences. It involves less intensive intergenerational contact over a longer time-frame and the older people featured were living in supported housing, and none had a dementia.

Questions for further work

Our evaluation of the programmes is on-going, but it is likely that quantitative questionnaire measures administered before and after the programme will be less informative than the qualitative and observational data. This raises the question of how best to evaluate these programmes? ‘In the moment’ effects are clear enough, and from our presence throughout the three days we are certain these do not result simply from skilful editing, but is there more we should be looking for? This is a familiar issue for psychosocial interventions in dementia care (MacPherson et al., 2009) – is an intervention worthwhile if it does not produce lasting change? Of course, the three-day model was chosen pragmatically, for the convenience of the

TV programme. In ‘real life’ a once a week visit for a couple of hours may be more sustainable and potentially have more lasting effects as relationships are built up. There is however something to be said for a more intensive experience at the outset, to break the ice and help all parties be comfortable with the approach. The nursery involved in ‘The toddlers who took on dementia’ continue to visit the care setting fortnightly and have undertaken Dementia Friends courses.

The most recent guidelines from NICE (2018) recommend services to: “Offer a range of activities to promote wellbeing that are tailored to the person’s preferences (recommendation 1.4.1)”. Should intergenerational work be viewed as just part of the range of activities that could be offered, or is there something of extra value, perhaps in terms of what children can offer in respect of acceptance and fun?

Further work is clearly needed to document the effects on children, and to address whether the effects are different for different age groups. It would also be helpful to know whether the benefits are different for people living with dementia, as opposed to older people in general.

With the growing popularity of intergenerational programme, the question arises as whether intergenerational programmes can become sustainable in the UK context? There are now examples of shared care facilities being opened, as in the USA and Australia and more are in the planning stages. While a shared site may be the ideal solution, how can programmes be implemented where a site is not shared? Can practical obstacles be overcome, of transport, health and safety and staffing? Is a neutral setting possible (e.g. a community centre) or do the children always have to go to the older people’s setting? Would the setting make a difference? A nursing home can be a daunting place to visit.

The Careshare project was driven by the requirement to make good TV programmes. Can the TV and media encourage the growth of sustainable intergenerational projects? It can certainly inspire others and the film and pictures can speak volumes as to what is possible. One local authority has in fact been inspired by Hen Blant Bach to set up a project across its older people’s and educational sectors, where typically there would be little interaction. But perhaps, as with engagement in arts programmes, there is added value in simply seeing people with dementia in a positive, hopeful, ‘heart-warming’ setting. We hope that such programmes can help reduce the stigma of care settings and of dementia and reinforce the personhood and human value of people living with dementia, as we see them engage in these natural, human interactions with young children.

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